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AUTHOR Teague, Deborah Coxwell
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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether students actually used the composition processes they learned in their first-year college writing classroom when they leave the classroom. Subjects were 200 Florida State University students--a mixture of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors from a variety of majors during fall semester 1997. Subjects were asked to respond to three writing prompts. Results revealed that 10% indicated that they almost always use a process approach to writing; 48% said they frequently use some of the techniques they were taught in their first-year writing classes; 27% stated that once they left their freshman composition classrooms, they did not use any of the components of the process approach to which they had been exposed, and 15% were never taught writing as a process--their teachers required only one draft, the final draft. Of this group, 46% of the freshmen indicated that they do not use any components of the process approach, and that percentage dropped to 34% among sophomores, 18% among juniors, and 8% among seniors. Findings suggest that 38% of the freshmen, 50% of the sophomores, 48% of the juniors, and 56% of the seniors all use some of the techniques that they were taught in their first-year writing classes. (Survey findings are appended.) (CR)

Deborah Coxwell Teague
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Beyond the First Year Writing Classroom: Exploring the Ways Students *Really* Write

Since the mid-1980s, process pedagogy has dominated the first-year college writing classroom. While we sometimes hear of a few English teachers out there somewhere who continue to teach one-draft, red-pen attacked writing, the great majority of us were either trained to teach writing as a process, or in the case of those of us who began teaching prior to the paradigm shift, have converted to process pedagogy. We believe in teaching our students to write the way *real* writers compose—by doing lots of drafting and revising. We stress the importance of getting feedback from others—of remembering that we almost always write for outside readers and not for ourselves.

But how do our students write when they leave our classrooms? How do they write when their political science, adolescent psychology, or international affairs professor assigns a 10-page paper due at the end of the semester—a paper about which the teacher is concerned with only the final draft and doesn't care how the student went about generating ideas for the paper or how many drafts the student produced on the way to a final draft? In those situations, do our students use the same composing processes we insisted they use in our first-year writing courses? And if they don't, do we waste our time teaching them to write this way if they discard our teaching when they walk out our classroom doors?

In an attempt to begin to address these questions, I surveyed 200 Florida State University students—a mixture of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors from a variety of majors during Fall Semester '97. I asked them to respond to three writing prompts:

1) Describe the writing process(es) your English teachers required you to use as you wrote your papers for your freshman composition courses. For example, did they require that you write and revise multiple drafts? If so, how many drafts and how many revisions? Did they require that you have other students in the class read and respond to your papers? Did they require that you use invention techniques such as freewriting, clustering, brainstorming, etc. to help you generate ideas for your papers?
2) Describe how you typically go about writing papers for classes when your teacher does not require you to use a prescribed writing process. In other words, describe how you go about writing papers when the way you write is left completely up to you; and
3) Describe the similarities and/or differences between the way you went about writing papers for your freshman composition courses and the way you typically go about writing papers when the process you use is left up to you.

In all honesty, I expected to find that many of the students would have tossed the process approach out the nearest window as they walked out of the doors to our classrooms. I was wrong. Of the 200 students surveyed, 10 percent indicated that they almost always use a process approach to writing; 48 percent said they frequently use some of the techniques they were taught in their first-year writing classes; 27 percent stated that once they left their freshman composition classrooms, they didn't use any of the components of the process approach to which they had

been exposed, and 15 percent were never taught writing as a process—their teachers required only one draft—the final draft.

I expected to find that of the four levels of students—freshman, sophomore, junior and senior—the first-year students would have the most positive attitudes regarding the process approach. After all, they were immersed in the process at the time at which they were responding to the survey. Their writing teachers were currently exposing them to the benefits of clustering, freewriting, and brainstorming to generate ideas for their papers. They were writing multiple drafts and revising at a variety of levels between drafts—changes that almost certainly were strengthening their writing. They were reaping the insights of their peers as they read and responded to each other's writing during workshop sessions. Or so I wanted them to think. I wanted these first-year writers to tell me that even when no teacher required them to use a process approach to writing, they did anyway because they had learned how much better their writing could be when they employed process approach strategies. That's not what they told me. Of the four levels—freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior—the first-year students were least likely to employ any components of a process approach when writing papers for classes other than first-year writing. Forty-six percent of the first-year students who responded to the survey indicated that they never use any components of the process approach outside of their freshman composition courses, and many of these students were quite candid in their responses. One student wrote that for her other classes, she almost always writes five-paragraph themes. "I just sit down and grind them out," she stated. Another first-year student's startlingly honest comment was, "There are no similarities between the way I write for English and the way I write

for my other classes. The other classes don't require drafts, and that makes it **very** easy to plagiarize."

While 46 percent of the freshmen surveyed indicated that they don't use any components of the process approach outside of their first-year writing classes, that percentage dropped to 34 percent among sophomores. One second-year student wrote that one of her freshman composition teachers had required that for each of the five papers they wrote during the semester, they write ". . .one draft, followed by a completely different draft of the same paper, and then combine the two into a final paper." When reflecting on the similarities between the way she wrote for her first-year writing classes and the way she writes for other classes, the student stated, "There's not really anything alike about the way I wrote then and the way I write now. I would never write two totally different drafts and then combine them. That's way too much work." Clearly, this student did not see the value in the particular process her teacher required, and I'm not sure I do either if, as the student indicated, the teacher required that every one of their five papers be composed in this manner.

Another sophomore stated, "I like to just sit at my word processor and type as the ideas come to me. Freshman comp required too much writing and rewriting. I ended up changing my paper so much that I didn't even like it anymore." One side of the writing teacher in me wants to think that this student was simply lazy—that she didn't want to take the time and effort required to grow as a writer. But research doesn't necessarily support that assumption. In "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision," Linda Flower and John Hayes et al. cite studies that suggest that when students revise, "their texts may get worse" (16). So perhaps the student who

reported that she no longer liked her papers after her teacher required she change them was not simply lazy. Perhaps repeated revisions are not **always** a necessary part of this young woman's writing process, and perhaps we, as teachers of writing, sometimes do more to deter growth in our students' writing than to encourage growth when we require them to follow a strict writing process approach in every paper they write for us.

Among the juniors surveyed, only 18 percent stated that they don't use any components of the writing process when writing papers for their various classes, and among the seniors, that figure dropped to just 8 percent. Clearly, a much smaller percentage of these upper level students state that they are always one-draft/final draft writers. One of the seniors who indicated that she no longer uses any components of a process approach had the following to say: "I just sit down at the computer and write one draft. There were more steps to writing in Freshman Composition, and that usually led to better papers." Even though this senior admits that when she used a process approach she wrote "better" papers, still, she sticks to writing only one draft. Apparently, she doesn't care enough about the quality of her writing to invest the time and thought a process approach demands. Or perhaps, though the writing teacher in me hates even considering this possibility, she has come to the realization that her teachers give her papers only a cursory read, so why should she put forth the extra time, thought, and effort demanded by a process approach? For whatever reason, writing is not a priority for this particular student, at this particular time in her life. But perhaps for most juniors and seniors, by the time they reach the third or fourth year of college, they have more of a vested interest in their writing—at least some of the time, for some of their papers, in some of their classes—and they realize that good writing often requires reseeing and rewriting.

Lest we become too dismayed by the fact that over a quarter of the students who responded to the survey reported that outside of their first-year writing classes they do not use any components of a process approach, we need to remember that 48 percent--almost half--indicated that they do use some of the techniques they were taught in their first-year writing classes. This was true of 38 percent of the freshmen, 50 percent of the sophomores, 48 percent of the juniors, and 56 percent of the seniors.

Of the 48 percent who indicated that they frequently use some components of a process approach, even when no teacher requires them to do so, some of their remarks focused on components that they were happy to discard, while other responses addressed components of the process they value. On the subject of feedback received from peer response groups, one freshman commented, "Outside of my English class I still write drafts, but I don't have other students read over my papers, and that eliminates one draft that I do. Usually in English when students read over my paper, they really don't write remarks that help too much, so it doesn't make too much of a difference." Clearly this student does not value the feedback he receives in his peer response group and gladly eliminates this step from the writing he does for other classes. One of the sophomores who responded to the survey made a similar remark: "My writing now is similar to the way my freshman composition teacher taught me to write. I still brainstorm and revise. However, I have not found it extremely worthwhile to have peers read my papers like we did in freshman composition because they do not make critical comments." However, another student's response, a freshman's, was exactly the opposite. She indicated that she writes multiple drafts for classes in which they are not required, but unlike the students who felt peer

response was a waste of their time, this first-year student stated: "I definitely write better papers for my English class because of the ideas I get from my group."

Of the students who indicated that they use at least some components of a process approach when writing, even when their teachers don't require them to do so, opinions varied greatly on the value of activities used to generate ideas for papers. An economics major who stated that he writes multiple drafts, does lots of revising, and has at least one other person read his papers and give him feedback, did **not** have a positive attitude toward the invention exercises his first-year writing teachers required. "I don't go through the meaningless clustering or brainstorming anymore," he bluntly stated. A junior majoring in creative writing had a similar opinion regarding required invention exercises: "In English 1101 and 1102 my teachers had us freewrite in class to come up with ideas. I like the process better when the way I write is totally up to me. I brainstorm everything in my head—I don't brainstorm well on paper. If a teacher requires that, I usually end up writing a bunch of BS down and never use it in my paper." Another student, however, a senior majoring in English Education, stated that she always brainstorms for ideas and then freewrites—techniques to which she was exposed in her first-year writing classes.

Students' opinions also varied greatly on the subject of writing multiple drafts. A sophomore who uses a modified version of the process approach he became familiar with in his first-year writing class commented, "In freshman comp, we had to write four drafts for each paper. I still write drafts now that I'm out of freshman comp, but I don't always write four of them." Another sophomore who stated that he continues to use some elements of a process approach indicated a similar reaction toward always being required to write multiple drafts: "Freshman comp was way

too many drafts for me because I like to change things as I go along." Another student, a junior majoring in communications, felt much the same way toward being required to write a specific number of drafts: "I am good at drafting when I am made to do it. However, when it's up to me, I sit with my laptop and go through writing 'spurts.' At times I can write page after page, and other times I seem to be going through a drought. It depends pretty much on the paper topic." Another student, a physical therapy major, who stated that she no longer does as much drafting and revising as she did in her first-year writing class, thought that her writing would be better if she took the time for those activities. "I still draft, but I don't write as many as my freshman comp teacher made us write—but I also don't think my papers are as good when I don't.

What can we, as teachers of writing, learn from the figures and responses I have shared with you? First, we can learn that the majority of our students do indeed make use of the ideas, the knowledge, the techniques, the strategies we share with them in an effort to help them grow as writers. They don't always use these ideas, this knowledge, these techniques, these strategies right away. Many of them wait until they are juniors or seniors, or until they have jobs which require them to write—they wait until, for one reason or another, they are ready to put more time and thought into their writing—perhaps because they care more about the grade they receive on the paper, or perhaps because they have a vested interest in the subject about which they are writing.

What else might these figures and responses reveal to us? They say to me that I need to rethink, to reconsider the manner in which I teach writing as a process. Like most of the teachers to whom the students referred in their responses, I have often required that my students complete

specific invention exercises and write a set number of papers, with a prescribed number of drafts leading up to the final draft. I'm still working on the logistics of exactly how to go about changing those rigid requirements for a class of 25 first-year writers. In all honesty, I'm not sure how complicated it will be or how practical for those of us teaching three, four, or even five writing courses to individualize each course, but I'm certainly looking at options. I wonder how many of my former students fooled me the way one of the juniors I surveyed fooled his first-year writing teachers. The student commented that his teachers always required all students to write three drafts followed by a final draft. "I would actually write the final draft first—then make up the rest," he revealed. "I would write my final draft and then do all of the extra B.S. that my teachers required." Perhaps this student would have benefited much more from his first-year writing courses had he actually written multiple drafts for each paper, but then again, perhaps he didn't always need to do so. I don't know. I do know, though, that in our efforts to teach writing as a process, we need to remember that there is not one process—there are many. In "Exploring Options in Composing," Jack Selzer has the following to say:

> ...too often teachers attempt to impose a single, 'ideal' composing style on their students. They direct students to adopt specific planning, invention, and revision tactics during every composing experience, without acknowledging that not every writing task requires the same composing tactics, that several efficient composing styles can be distinguished (not only among writers but for each writer), or that the choice of a composing style, like every other rhetorical choice, will vary not only with topic, audience, and occasion, but also with the writer's own aims, experience, abilities, knowledge, and personal quirks. I contend that if teachers will acknowledge a number of effective overall composing styles—as well as options

for performing each composing activity—they will be more likely to produce flexible and resourceful writers. (276-77)

Perhaps if more of us revise the way we teach writing as a process and give our students a greater choice of composing styles, an even greater percentage of them will practice what we preach when they leave our classrooms.

Survey Findings

	Almost Always Use Same Process(es) as Taught in FYW	Use Some Process Techniques Taught in FYW	Completely Discard Process Approach Taught in FYW	No Writing	Never Taught Process Approach
FR	10% (5)	38% (19)	46% (23)	6% (3)	
SOPH	8% (4)	50% (25)	34% (17)	0	8% (4)
JR	14% (7)	48% (24)	18 % (9)	0	20% (10)
SR	6% (3)	56% (28)	8% (4)	0	30% (15)
AV	9.5% (19)	48% (96)	26.5% (53)	1.5% (3)	14.5% (29)

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Flower, Linda, John R. Hayes, Linda Carey, Karen Shriver, and James Stratman. "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision." *College Composition and Communication* 37 (1986): 16-55.

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